

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Hepatitis A

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A, also called infectious hepatitis, is a contagious viral disease that makes the liver swell. It can take from 15 to 50 days to get sick after being exposed to the hepatitis A virus. The average is about a month.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms depend on the person's age. Adults and teens are more likely to have the classic symptoms of fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, and jaundice. The signs of jaundice include dark brown urine and pale stools (feces). The whites of the eyes turn yellow, as can the skin of light-skinned people. Young children with hepatitis A often have mild flu-like symptoms, an upset stomach, or no symptoms at all. They seldom get jaundice. Hepatitis A symptoms last a week or two. Some adults can feel sick for as long as a few months, but this is rare.

How is it spread?

The hepatitis A virus is usually found in the stools (feces) of infected people. The virus is most likely to be spread when people do not wash their hands after using the toilet or changing a diaper or soiled sheets, then touch their own mouths, prepare food for others, or touch others with their contaminated hands. This spreads the disease from person to person. It can also be spread by contaminated food (such as shellfish) or water. The time of highest risk for spreading the virus to others is during the two weeks *before* symptoms begin. Most people stop being contagious one week after their symptoms start. Unlike other hepatitis viruses, hepatitis A virus is usually not spread by blood.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can. People who live with or have sex with people who have the disease are at high risk of catching it. Hepatitis A sometimes spreads among young children in day care because many are in diapers and cannot wash their own hands, and no one knows they have the disease because they have no symptoms. Spreading among school-aged children is less common because they are more likely to have symptoms, and most have learned to wash their hands before eating and after using the toilet.

How is it diagnosed?

A blood test looks for antibodies that fight the virus. This blood test can tell the difference between a current infection and a past one. There are also blood tests to measure how much damage has been done to the liver, but these tests do not show what caused the damage.

How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no treatment for the disease, and most people do not need any. Problems such as retaining fluid and blood abnormalities are rare, but they can be treated.

How can you prevent hepatitis A?

- **Wash your hands.**
Good handwashing protects you against hepatitis A and many other diseases. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching or eating food and after using the toilet or changing a diaper.

- **Cook shellfish.**

Don't eat raw or undercooked shellfish. Thorough cooking destroys the hepatitis A virus.

- **Get hepatitis A vaccine if:**

- You plan to travel to or work in a country with high rates of hepatitis A (Mexico; all Central and South American countries; all African, Caribbean and Asian countries except Japan; and the countries of southern and eastern Europe).
- You live in a community with high rates of hepatitis A (Native American reservations, Alaskan Native villages, Pacific Islander villages, and some Hispanic and religious communities).
- You have chronic liver disease.
- You have a bleeding disorder and get clotting factors.
- You use street drugs of any kind.
- You are a man who has sex with other men.

- **Get immune globulin (IG) if:**

- You did not get the vaccine and become exposed to hepatitis A. IG works best if you get it within 2 weeks after being exposed.
- You are allergic to the vaccine or chose not to get it, and you will be traveling in an area with high rates of hepatitis A.

- **Get immune globulin (IG) for your children if:**

They are under 2 years old and will be traveling or living with you in an area with high rates of hepatitis A. They will need IG because the vaccine cannot be given to children until they are 2 years old.

Will IG make you immune to hepatitis A?

No. IG only partly protects you against hepatitis A virus for 3–5 months. You can still get the disease and spread it to others, but IG can make your symptoms milder. If you think you might be exposed again, you should talk to your doctor about getting hepatitis A vaccine, which protects for many years.

Are there any health regulations for people with hepatitis A?

Yes. Because hepatitis A can easily be spread to other people, doctors are required by law to report cases of hepatitis A to the local board of health. To protect the public, workers who have hepatitis A cannot work in any food business until their fevers are completely gone and a week has passed since their symptoms started. Coworkers may need to get IG. The term "food business" includes restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens, dairy or food-processing plants, and any other place where workers handle food or drinks, give oral care (such as brushing people's teeth), or dispense medicines.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- Your local board of health (listed in the phone book under local government)
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization (617) 983- 6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>

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